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Left Behind— or Left **BEDAZZLED?**



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Left Behind— or Left Bedazzled?

[Part 1]

Dave Miller, Ph.D.

[EDITORS' NOTE: This article is the first installment in a two-part examination of Dispensational Premillennialism. Part II will follow next month.]

THE *American Heritage Dictionary* defines bedazzled: “To dazzle so completely as to make blind” (2000, p. 159). A significant portion of Christendom has been bedazzled by the sensationalism of Dispensational Premillennialism. Events in the Middle East continually evoke a steady stream of fundamentalist outcries that the end of time is near, the Rapture is about to occur, the Antichrist, Armageddon, and the Tribulation are all imminent. Does the Bible really teach these doctrines? Does the Bible really speak about Iraq, Russia, China, the modern state of Israel, and the Middle East?

The claim that “the end is near” is certainly not new. Indeed, such claims have been incessant since Jesus left the Earth. Periodically, a religious figure will capture national attention, announcing the impending return of Jesus, even to the point of setting a date, only to fade into the anonymity from which he arose when his claim falls flat—but having achieved his “15 minutes of fame” (see Whisenant and Brewer, 1989). The sensationalism sells well and tweaks the curiosity of large numbers of people. Incredibly, this pattern has been repeating itself literally **for centuries**. Hal Lindsey achieved nationwide attention over 40 years ago with his national best-seller

The Late Great Planet Earth (1970). With the approach of Y2K, outcries of doom, global disruption, and Armageddon were widespread. More recently, a prominent repackaging of the dispensational brand of premillennialism is the popular 12 volume *Left Behind* book series first published from 1995 to 2007 by Tyndale House (*Left Behind*, 2008). The book series spawned three movies starring Kirk Cameron between 2000 and 2005, and the newly released (October, 2014) remake starring Nicolas Cage (“Left Behind: The End...,” 2014).

INTRODUCTION

UNLIKE postmillennialism (the view that Jesus will return **after** the world is Christianized following a long period of peace and righteousness), and amillennialism (the view that the Bible predicts no worldwide period of peace and righteousness, with good and evil continuing until the end), premillennialism is the view that Jesus will return **before** a 1,000 year period of peace and righteousness and reign in person as king on Earth. The dispensational brand of premillennialism is a system of Bible interpretation that was advocated in the early 19th century through the writings of John Darby (Stokes, 1885, pp. 537-552), which were popularized in the early 20th century in the *Scofield Reference Bible* (Gaebelein, 1943; Mangum and Sweetnam, 2009). According

to this view, history is divided into seven dispensations with the “church age” preceding the arrival of the kingdom. Briefly, the basic planks of dispensationalism are as follows:

1. At some point in the near future, Jesus will secretly “Rapture” the saved, both living and deceased, from the Earth, taking them to heaven to receive their reward.
2. A seven year period of intense “Tribulation” will then ensue on Earth.
3. During the seven year period of “Tribulation,” the “Antichrist” will appear.
4. Worldwide turmoil will escalate, culminating in the battle of “Armageddon.”
5. Jesus will return with His saints in order to end “Armageddon” and usher in His 1,000 year reign (the “Millennium”) on a literal throne in Jerusalem, at the end of which, eternity will commence with some going to heaven and the rest to hell.

Consider the following evaluation of each of these five planks.

WILL THERE BE A RAPTURE?

THE word “rapture” comes from the Latin word “*rapere*” which means “to seize, snatch out, take away.” Dispensationalists apply this word to the idea that Christ will come suddenly and secretly in the air to snatch away from the Earth the living saints and the resurrected bodies of those saints who have died. This “Rapture” is supposed to occur just prior to the seven-year “Tribulation” period.

Proponents allege that families will be shocked by the strange disappearance of a mother, father, or child. Driverless cars will collide in the streets (cf. bumper sticker: “In case of rapture, this vehicle will be unmanned”). A man and wife will be in bed; she hears a noise and turns her head to find him gone. Planes will crash with no pilots found. The “Rapture” is represented as an invisible

coming of the Lord for His saints leaving visible results of chaos and confusion among the remaining unbelievers.

In reality, the word “rapture” is not found in the Bible, though it is claimed to be the Latin equivalent of *harpazo* translated “caught up” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (NKJV). Lindsey admitted, “[i]t is not found in the Bible” (p. 126), and noted that the word “translation” is just as suitable. Yet the word “translation” does occur in the English New Testament. Paul referred to the fact that God “delivered us out of the power of darkness, and **translated** us into the kingdom of the Son of his love” (Colossians 1:13, ASV). So when an unbeliever obeys the Gospel, receives forgiveness of sins, and is added to the church of Christ, he is taken out of the world and transferred to Christ’s kingdom. This use of the term conflicts with the idea that it refers to Christians being “raptured” from the physical Earth to meet Jesus in the air.

Actually, the Scriptures use three terms to refer to the return of Christ. First, *parousia* is translated “coming, presence, or advent.” Second, *epiphaneia* is translated “appearing, manifestation, or brightness.” Third, *apokalupsis* is translated “revelation.” Dispensationalism claims that “coming” (*parousia*) refers to the “Rapture” which occurs seven years before the “Appearing” (*epiphaneia*) or “Revelation” (*apokalupsis*). Accordingly, at the “Rapture,” Jesus will come for the church only, while at the “Revelation,” Jesus will return **with** the church and put an end to the “Tribulation” and “Armageddon.”

The primary passage used to support the idea of the “Rapture” is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. But this passage was not given to deal with the return of Christ, but to clarify the status of Christians **before** the return of Christ. Its purpose was twofold. First, it was designed to reassure Christians that their deceased loved ones would

be able to share in the Lord’s return, and second, it informed Christians that those who are still living when Christ returns will have no precedence or advantage over those who have already died. This dual function of the text constitutes a very different emphasis from that imposed upon it by dispensationalists.

The dispensational distinctions made between the three terms referring to Christ’s return are simply untenable (see Boettner, 1957, pp. 163-165). Dispensationalists assert that the “coming” (*parousia*) in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1 refers to the “Rapture.” Yet the same word is used in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 to speak of Jesus coming **with** His saints and therefore coincides with the dispensational concept of the “Appearing” or “Revelation” seven years **after** the “Rapture.” Dispensationalists apply 2 Thessalonians 2:8 to the “Antichrist” and therefore must understand this verse as a reference to the “Appearing” (*epiphaneia*). Yet the verse uses the expression “the manifestation (brightness—*epiphaneia*) of His coming (*parousia*).” Thus the term “coming” is used in the New Testament to refer to **both** dispensational concepts of the “Rapture” and the “Appearing,”

and the two expressions are even combined in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 to refer to **one and the same event**.

The term “Revelation” (*apokalupsis*) in 1 Corinthians 1:7 is descriptive of what the dispensationalists call the “Rapture” since Christians await it. But in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, it clearly refers to the “Appearing” (*epiphaneia*). The term “appearing” (*epiphaneia*) is used in 1 Timothy 6:14 as the event that terminates Christian activity on Earth and thus fits the “Rapture” concept. But in 2 Timothy 4:1, the reference to judgment fits the “Appearing.” Paul stated: “Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8). Observe that dispensationalists would have Paul translated into heaven at the “Rapture” **before** he receives his crown of righteousness—which he says he will receive at Jesus’ “appearing” (*epiphaneia*).

In view of these observations, it is evident that the three words relating to Christ’s return are used in the New Testament **synonymously and interchangeably**. The New Testament simply makes no distinction between

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the coming of the Lord **for** His saints (“Rapture”) and the coming of the Lord **with** His saints (“Appearing” or “Revelation”). The dispensational dichotomy is not supported by the language of the New Testament.

Additionally, if Christians are to be removed seven years before the “Revelation,” then no passage should admonish them to live their lives expecting to remain on Earth **until** the “Revelation.” However, many passages do just that. For example, in Titus 2:13, Paul refers to the “blessed hope” and the “appearing” as one and the same event, i.e., Christ’s coming. Boettner observes:

In the original Greek the two substantives *hope* and *appearing* are closely united with the common article. They are not two separate events, as if it read, “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing,” but simply, “looking for the blessed hope and appearing.” The one explains the other. “The blessed hope” of Christians is “the glorious appearing” of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ (p. 166, italics in orig.).

Another example is 1 Peter 2:14 and 4:13 where the grace that the Christian is to set his hope on is to be received at the revelation (*apokalupsei*) of Christ, at which time the Christian may rejoice. But, according to dispensationalism, the Christian may rejoice seven years earlier at the “Rapture.”

Further, the word “end” (*sunteleia*) means “completion, consummation, close, the full end” (Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 799; Thayer, 1901, p. 606; Nicoll, n.d., 1:202; Moulton and Milligan, 1982, p. 613). Used six times in the New Testament, it refers to the end of the world (i.e., the last of life on Earth). Noted Presbyterian commentator Albert Barnes explains that the term as used in Hebrews 9:26 refers to “the last dispensation or economy; that under which the affairs of the world will be wound up” (1971, p. 215). The

term parallels the expression “last days” which likewise refers to “the closing period of the world” (Barnes, 2005, p. 31). Lutheran commentator R.C.H. Lenski describes the word as “‘the completion’ when all things shall reach their goal and end” (2001, p. 538).

In Matthew 28:20, Jesus promised to be with the disseminators of the Gospel message to the very “end.” Such a promise implies that the church will remain on the Earth, preaching the Gospel, until the Judgment day. But if the church is raptured away seven years **before** the end, she cannot fulfill what Christ commanded her to do. In Matthew 13:39-49, no removal of the saints occurs before the “full end.” The righteous and the wicked grow **together** until the very end. The separation of the two comes at **the end** (not seven years **before** the end). The dispensationalist claims that the righteous will be taken out from among the wicked. But the Bible says just the opposite: the wicked will be taken out from among the righteous (Matthew 13:39-40).

The same concept may be seen in the New Testament use of “the last day.” The doctrine of the “Rapture” asserts that believers will be raised seven years before the “Revelation” and 1,007 years before the end of the “Millennium.” But Jesus Himself stated four times that believers will be raised “at the last day” (John 6:39,40,44,54). How can there be additional days after the **last day**? Dispensationalism contradicts Jesus’ own statements that He will raise believers at the **last day**, implying that believers cannot be raised **before** the last day.

A final observation on the “Rapture” is its alleged secretive nature. The second coming of Christ is nowhere depicted as secret. In fact, just the opposite is true. Christ’s coming will be accompanied by “blazing fire” (2 Thessalonians 1:7), the sound of a trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:52),

a “shout,” the “voice of the archangel,” and the “trump of God” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). In fact, “every eye will see Him” (Revelation 1:7). Clearly, all persons will witness this incredible occasion. In fact, the very passage upon which the doctrine of the “Rapture” is founded (i.e., 1 Thessalonians 4:16), far from describing a quiet and secretive event, is as Boettner notes, “about the noisiest verse in the Bible!” (p. 171).

WILL THERE BE A TRIBULATION?

DISPENSATIONALISTS also believe that when Christ comes secretly and snatches away the saved at the “Rapture,” He will take them to heaven where they will receive their reward. They say Revelation chapters four and five describe this heavenly scene. During this period, a seven year Tribulation will rage on Earth, as described in Revelation chapters 4-19, that will culminate in the battle of Armageddon. Various passages are sprinkled here and there in this elaborate theory of the end times. But Matthew chapter 24 is perhaps the most prominent passage that is offered in an effort to prove an alleged “Tribulation.” Hence, an exegesis of this central proof-text is necessitated.

Matthew 24

In Matthew 23, Jesus pronounced multiple woes upon the Jewish authorities of His day. In verse 38, He declared that the Jews’ house would be left to them desolate. He then left the immediate confines of the Temple complex, but paused at a distance with His disciples to continue the same line of thought. He referred their attention to the Temple and said: “There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be torn down” (Matthew 24:2). Such a declaration would have been shocking, if not horrifying, to these “dyed-in-the-wool” Jews that took great pride in the Temple. Privately, the disciples asked Jesus two questions:

(1) “When will these things (the Temple disruption—DM) be? and (2) “What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3). Jesus proceeded to answer these questions in such a way as to distinguish between the destruction of the Temple on the one hand, and the end of the world on the other. He showed that they are completely separate events.

Jesus began His response by delineating numerous signs that would take place prior to the toppling of the Temple. First, many would come claiming to be the Christ (vs. 5). As a matter of fact, near the time of Jerusalem’s fall in A.D. 70, many false messiahs arose, claiming to be the Christ. Josephus, a Jewish historian, said that such messiahs became more numerous before the siege of the city (*Antiquities...*, XX.V.1; XX.VIII.6; *The Wars...*, II.XIII.4). Gamaliel also alluded to such figures during that time period (Acts 5:34-37). And Paul warned of false “apostles of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:13).

Second, Jesus said that “wars and rumors of wars” would circulate, “but the end is not yet” (vs. 6). Numerous wars were engaged in by the Romans against various smaller nations as Rome continued her trek toward worldwide domination. At the same time, Rome had to cope constantly with revolt and rebellion among her conquered peoples. Josephus verified this fact (e.g., *Antiquities...*, XX). The “end” referred to in this verse applied to the end of the Temple, not the end of the world.

Third, Jesus predicted that famine, pestilence, and earthquakes would occur (vs. 7). It is documented historical fact that during the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, famines and earthquakes occurred. There was a massive famine during the reign of Claudius Caesar before the destruction of Jerusalem (Acts 11:28; cir. A.D. 47; see Bruce, 1962, 4:309). An unusual number of great

earthquakes occurred during the reign of Nero in A.D. 60-70, destroying many cities of Asia Minor (Tacitus, *Annals*, XII.43/58; XIV.27; XV.22). The occurrence of these signs between the time of Jesus’ word (A.D. 30) and the destruction (A.D. 70) would be seen as the direct fulfillment of Jesus’ statements. But if Jesus’ words apply to a yet future event, His words make no sense for there have been earthquakes and famines all over the world for the last 1,900 years, and the occurrence of them today is no sign at all.

Fourth, Jesus further stated that the apostles would be hated, persecuted, and even killed (vs. 9). Peter, Paul, James (Acts 12:2), and James the Less were all put to death before the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus said that false prophets would arise, many Christians would stumble, and evil would abound (vss. 10-13). As the pressure of persecution increased during the early decades of Christianity, so the faith of many decreased. Apostasy became prevalent. It is during such turmoil that false teachers make their mark by capitalizing on spiritual confusion, doubt, and weakness (cf. Matthew 7:15; Acts 20:29-30; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Peter 2:1-2).

Fifth, Jesus said that the Gospel would be preached in all the world (vs. 14). It is also historical fact that the Gospel was preached to all the world prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Paul wrote to Christians in Rome (A.D. 58) and said their faith was spoken of “throughout the whole world” (Romans 1:8). When Paul wrote to the church of Christ at Colossae (A.D. 62), the Gospel was “bearing fruit and increasing” (Colossians 1:6) in the entire world, which can only happen if the seed is first sown “in all the world.” In fact, Paul flatly stated that the Gospel had been preached “to every creature which is under heaven” (KJV), or “in all creation under heaven” (NASB—Colossians 1:23). The point is clear:

The Gospel was preached to the world prior to A.D. 70 as Jesus predicted.

Once all of these signs (i.e., false Christs, wars/rumors of wars, famines/earthquakes, persecution, death of the apostles, the apostasy of many, the rise of false prophets, and worldwide proclamation of the Gospel) came to pass, Jesus said the “end” would come (vs. 14). That is, the end of Jerusalem, the end of the Temple, the end of formal Judaism, and the end of the Old Testament economy would occur. Jesus said this end would come about with the presence of the “abomination of desolation” in the holy place (vs. 15). He applied Daniel 9:27 to the presence of the Roman army at the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (cf. Luke 21:20).

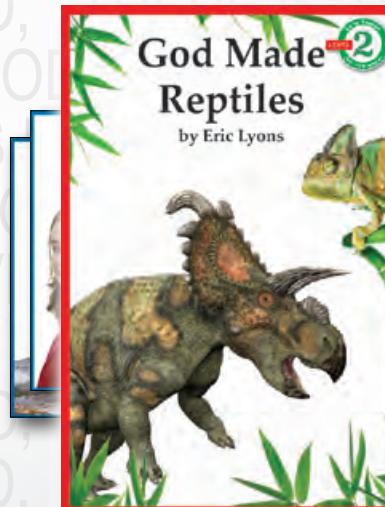
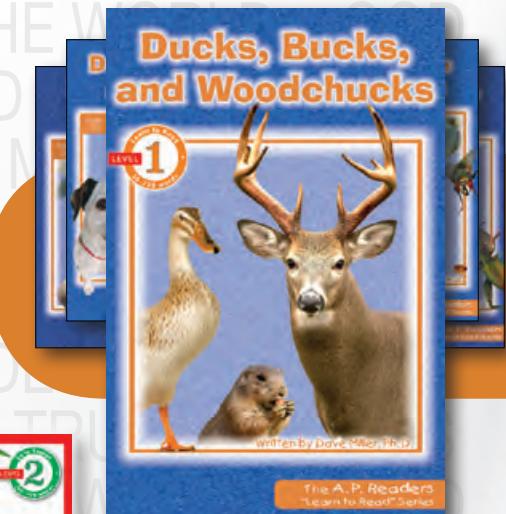
Consequently, Jesus urged the faithful in Judea to “flee into the mountains” (vs. 16). History records a remarkable factor concerning the fall of Jerusalem. With the approach of A.D. 70, Jewish Christians took the invasion of the Roman armies as the appointed sign which Christ had given. Upon seeing the Roman military machine in full march, Jewish Christians dropped everything and made their escape to Pella, a village east of the Jordan in Perea about 15 miles south of the Sea of Galilee (Boettner, p. 201; Keener, 1993, p. 113; Wilson, 1989, p. 76; Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.5.3; Sheppard, 2013, pp. 10-14; Gichon, 1981, 113:56; Epiphanius, *De pond, et Mens*, 15). Thus, while God was bringing due wrath upon unbelieving Jews, He made provision for those Jews who had become Christians to escape.

Jesus pronounced woe on those who, in facing the hardships that would occur, would have the added difficulties associated with protecting and nursing children—especially if it occurred in winter or on the Sabbath (vss. 19-20). Bearing and caring for children is a difficult task in and of itself. But such functions become incredibly difficult when one is “on

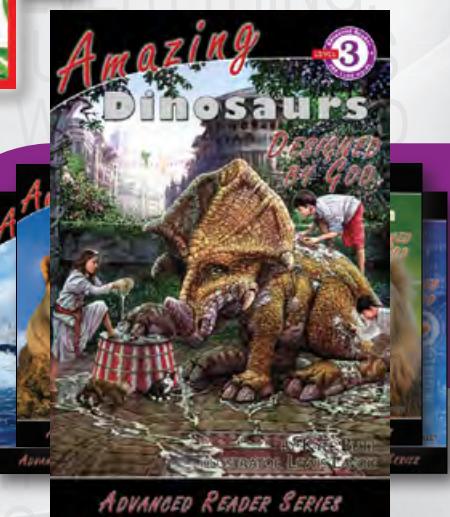
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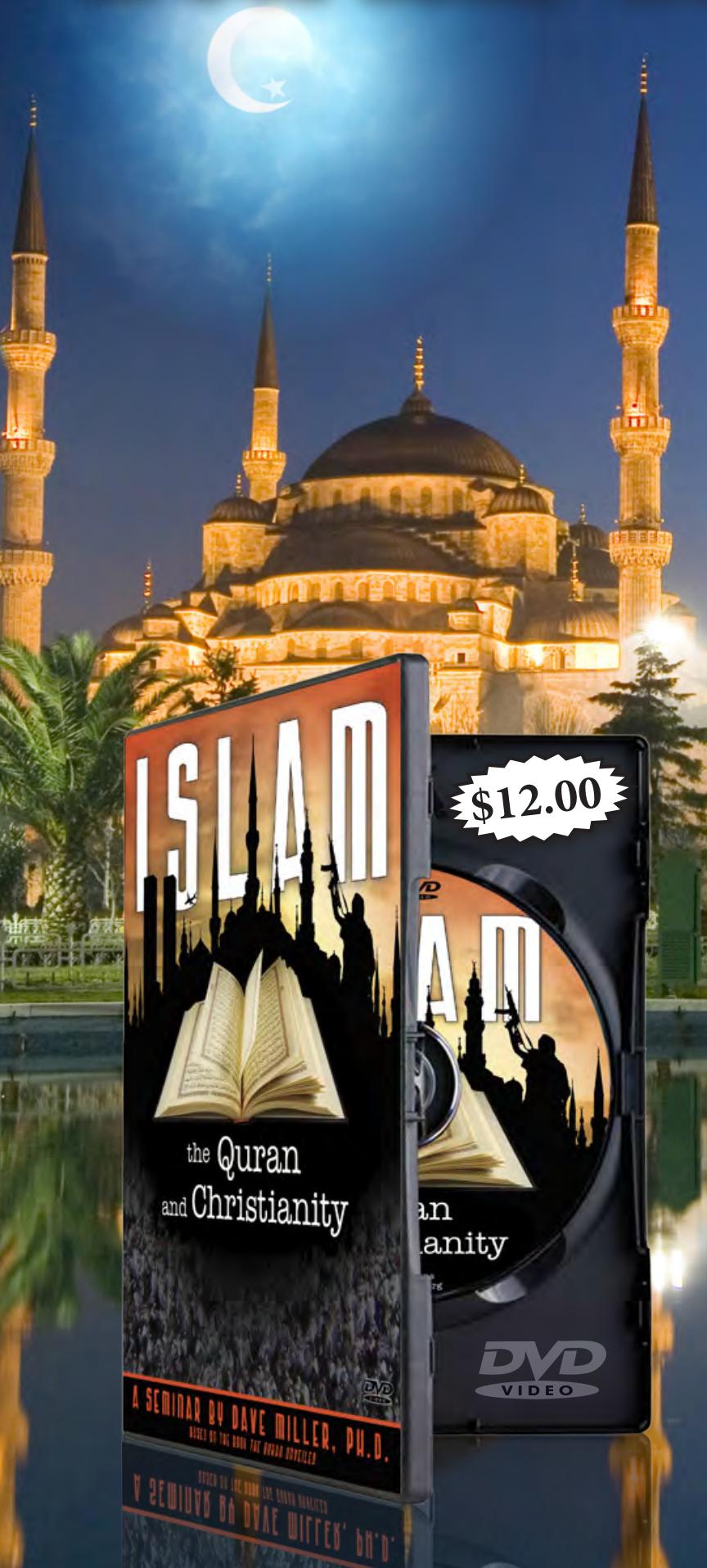
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the run." Likewise, escape from the onslaught of a ruthless military force would be complicated by the conditions that accompany the wintertime. The cold and hunger would constitute hardship on children and adults alike. The allusion to the Sabbath refers to the fact that Jewish authorities would still be enforcing observance of the Sabbath with closed city gates (*Nehemiah* 13:19). Thus, these two verses deal with hindrances to flight from the besiegement of Jerusalem.

Jesus further stated that "great tribulation" would be associated with these events, comparably worse than at any time and resulting in the loss of many lives (vss. 21-22). We who live subsequent to A.D. 70 have difficulty fathoming the magnitude of the tribulation experienced during the destruction of Jerusalem. At that time, Jews were crowded together from all over the world to observe Passover. The mass misery that resulted from the Roman siege was extensive. Josephus, an eyewitness, alluded to the atrocity in the words, "neither did any other city suffer such miseries... from the beginning of the world" (*The Wars...*, V.10.5). The phrase "nor ever shall be" shows that Jesus had in mind a time near His own day with much time to come after the event. If He was alluding to some period near the end of time (as per dispensationalism), He would not have added such words since there would be no future time left for such an occurrence. God could have easily permitted every single Jew to be wiped from the face of the Earth. But for the sake of His church (which included converted Jews), the period of tribulation was shortened (vs. 22).

Next, Jesus warned that during the period leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, false Christs and false prophets would come forward and display magical tricks to deceive people into thinking they were authentic representatives of God (vss. 23-26). When people face severe and intense

disruption to their lives, they tend to become easy prey for those who seek to exploit the hardships of others. Jesus warned of this phenomenon as the time for Jerusalem's destruction grew nearer. When any individuals, even in our own day, seek to seduce people into believing that the Lord's final coming is imminent, Jesus says, "Don't believe it!" (cf. vs. 26). Why? Because when Jesus comes at the end of time, **everyone** will know it. The second coming will be as visible and as evident as a blinding flash of lightening that covers the entire sky (vs. 27).

In contrast with the ultimate return of Jesus, the coming of Jesus in judgment on Jerusalem would be discernible on very different grounds: "For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together" (vs. 28). Typically classified as a type of vulture due to its carrion feeder traits, the eagle was the symbol of Roman power. It was carried by the different units of the Roman army wherever Roman authority was being exerted (Lightfoot, n.d., 24:28; cf. Arndt and Gingrich, p. 19—"eagle symbol of swiftness"). The contemporaries were readily familiar with this fact. Thus, in A.D. 70, the Roman vultures swarmed over Jerusalem and devoured the carcass of apostate Judaism (cf. Wallace, 1960, p. 252).

Next, Jesus resorted to the use of several highly figurative phrases which are based upon Old Testament apocalyptic language: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken" (vs. 29). The phrase "after the tribulation of those days" means after the horrible events that occurred during the siege of the city, which history records began on August 10, A.D. 70 and lasted some two months. In that short period, 1.1 million died in unspeakable anguish, and 97,000 were

taken as slaves (Josephus, *The Wars...*, VI.9.3). After the tribulation of the siege, the final destruction occurred. Jesus described this destruction in symbolic, apocalyptic terminology reminiscent of the description of the destruction of Babylon recorded in *Isaiah* 13: "The day of the Lord is near" (vs. 6); "For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shed its light. Thus I will punish the world for its evil" (vs. 10); "I will shake the heavens, and the earth will be shaken from its place" (vs. 13). All one need do is read *Isaiah* 13 to see that these statements referred to the military onslaught of the Medes in the sixth century B.C. that brought about the downfall of the Babylonian empire. Similarly, *Isaiah* depicted the destruction of Edom in terminology that spoke of the cosmos being dissolved and the sky rolling up like a scroll (34:4). *Ezekiel* portrayed the fate of Egypt in terms of the darkening of the stars, Moon, and Sun (32:7). There is no question that such language is highly figurative, hyperbolic, and designed to make an **impression**, to create an **effect** in the mind of the hearer, and not intended to be taken literally. If God can discuss the overthrow of Babylon, Egypt, and Edom in such extravagant, dramatic terminology, surely He can do the same when discussing the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

At this point would "appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven" (vs. 30). In other words, the **darkening** of the Jewish temple, the **shaking up** of the Jewish commonwealth, and the **fall** of Jewish authority through the instrumentality of imperial Rome was the sign or signal that Christ had come in judgment on Israel. He was the One responsible for the misery that would shroud the Jewish nation. Jesus had done exactly what He had told Caiaphas he could expect to witness personally: "the Son of man is coming in the clouds of heaven"

(Matthew 26:64). Jews knew that such language was completely normal when describing God's execution of wrath in history. When God punished Egypt in the long ago, He "rode on a swift cloud...into Egypt" (Isaiah 19:1)—a graphically appropriate way to envision God's vengeance. (NOTE: The use of the term "tribes" refers to the Jewish families that mourned the fall of national Judaism—all the Jewish tribes of the Earth.)

Next, angels would go forth with a great trumpet sound and gather together the elect (vs. 31). Historians report that once Jewish opposition to Christianity (reflected throughout the book of Acts) was removed in A.D. 70, the **true nation** of God (i.e., the church of Christ—the "holy nation" [1 Peter 2:9]—the Christian elect) began to experience unparalleled effectiveness. The sound of the Gospel trumpet was heard more clearly than ever before. The word for "angel" is the normal Greek word for "messenger." In this passage it refers to the emissaries of the Gospel who, by means of the preached Word, gathered individuals into the elect fold from all over the world. Such phraseology is reminiscent of the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) in which every 50th year, the believing community sounded a ram's horn all through the land, and proclaimed the year as a year of release or liberation.

Jesus next uttered a brief parable about a fig tree (vs. 32-33). Tender branches and new leaves on a fig tree function as **signs**—signals that summer is near. Likewise, the signs that Jesus delineated pinpointed the time when Jerusalem was to be destroyed. Once faithful disciples began to observe the unfolding of these signs, they would realize that the city was about to be besieged by the Roman armies. They could then "look for their redemption" (Luke 21:28), i.e., act upon their providentially prearranged escape plan and receive deliverance from

the persecutions of Jewish authority. The repetition of the second person plural pronoun is further proof that Jesus was referring to His own generation, not a generation centuries in the future: "So **you** also, when **you** see..." (vs. 33).

Jesus brought to a close His response to the first question asked by His disciples with the words: "This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" (vs. 34). The generation to whom He was addressing Himself would still be living when "all these things" would occur. Thus every single sign that Jesus pinpointed would occur during **that** generation. Some, however, suggest that the Greek word for "generation" (*genea*) may also be translated "race," in which case Jesus was simply saying that the Jewish race would not pass out of existence before all these things happened to them. But if this be true, then Jesus is put in the position of telling the Jews what would happen to their race, and then saying that their race would not pass away until everything that was going to happen to their race happened—an absurdly redundant notion. Why would God declare a group's fate, and then assure the group that they would still be around to suffer that fate? Obviously, God would never have told them the specifics of their fate if they were not going to be present to experience those specifics. The fact of the matter is that the word "generation" is used repeatedly in the Gospel of Matthew, and it designates those who are living at a particular point in time (cf. Matthew 1:17; 11:16; 12:39-43; 23:36). In fact, in Matthew 23:36-39, where the context is the same as Matthew 24, Jesus spoke of the contemporary population of Jerusalem as the "generation" that He had in mind—the one that He sought to "gather" and whose house would be "left desolate."

Verse 35 functions as a transition verse. Then Jesus turned His attention

to dealing with the disciples' second question. He emphatically distinguished between the destruction of Jerusalem, that He had been discussing, and the end of the world or second coming. Even if the disciples had not asked about "the end of the world," it would have been appropriate for Jesus to have dealt with the matter since He would not want the two to be confused. So He alluded to "that day," i.e., the day heaven and earth will pass away (vs. 35), the world will end, and Christ would come again (vs. 3). Thus, verses 36-51, as well as chapter 25, refer to the end of time. Jesus' first point was that, whereas those who give proper heed to the signs can pinpoint the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, no one can pinpoint the day of Christ's return. There will be, in fact, **absolutely no signs** to alert men to the second coming. Verses 37-39 clearly show that life on this Earth will be going on as it always has with "business as usual." Jesus' ultimate return will be totally unexpected with no signs to warn of its approach (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10).

When studied carefully in context and in light of history, verses in Matthew 24 that dispensationalists claim refer to the end times are seen to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. Without a doubt, there will be tribulation in the world. Christians are, in fact, assured of such (2 Timothy 3:12; John 16:33; Acts 14:22). Christians always have and always will endure tribulation. But there will be no future period of tribulation from which saints will be exempt as the dispensationalists describe. The world may well experience World War III. Horrible atrocities may well be unleashed upon humanity. But such future events will in no way result as the fulfillment of biblical teaching. The Bible simply does not teach that there will be a future seven year "Tribulation" on Earth that will culminate in a battle of Armageddon.

WILL THERE BE AN ANTICHRIST?

MOVING to the next prominent doctrine of dispensationalism, we consider the alleged appearance during the “Tribulation” of the “Antichrist.” The term “antichrist” occurs **only five times** in Scripture, **only** in the writing of John, and **only** in two of his five books: 1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7. The implications are significant. Dispensationalists do not go to 1 and 2 John when they discuss the Antichrist. They go to Revelation, 2 Thessalonians, or Daniel. They go to passages that do not even use the word “Antichrist.”

In stark contrast to current claims, John applied the term “antichrist” to **more than one** individual, and to individuals who were living **then**—in the first century. First John 2:18 states that numerous antichrists had arisen in John’s day, and he therefore contended that “it is the last hour” (i.e., the final period of religious history commonly referred to as “the last days” as in Acts 2:16-17). He then described their behavior as “not of God” (1 John 4:3). “Antichrists” were simply **all those** who denied Christ (1 John 2:22). John, therefore, labeled any such deluded soul as “the deceiver” and “the antichrist” (2 John 7). Notice the use of the article. John was saying that people living in his own day who denied the incarnation of Jesus were to be regarded as the antichrist! Not just **an** antichrist—but **the** antichrist! The idea that the term “antichrist” is to be applied to some “future fuehrer” (Lindsey, 1970, p. 87) who will draw the world into a global holocaust is totally out of harmony with John’s inspired use of the term.

Daniel 9

The first passage which some say predicts an “Antichrist” is Daniel 9:24-27. Observe carefully the content of this marvelous prophecy. During the prophetic period that Daniel

identified in terms of 70 symbolic weeks (vs. 24), transgression, sin, and iniquity would be “finished,” “ended,” and “reconciliation provided for.” This terminology clearly refers to Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross (Hebrews 9:26). The effect of Christ’s atoning work was that “everlasting righteousness” was ushered in. As Paul stated: “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21; cf. Jeremiah 23:5-6). Because of what Jesus did, individuals may now stand before God completely righteous through obedient faith (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Likewise, “vision” and “prophecy” would be “sealed up.” This refers to the inevitable termination of Old Testament prophecy and its fulfillment in Christ’s appearance in human history: “Yes, and all the prophets from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days” (Acts 3:24; Hebrews 1:1-2). Finally, the phrase in Daniel 9:24 that speaks of the “anointing” of the “most holy” refers to the public ministry and subsequent official crowning of Jesus as He took His place upon His throne to rule in His kingdom. Isaiah said: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has **anointed Me** to preach good tidings to the poor” (61:1, emp. added). On the day of Pentecost, Peter said: “Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:33). Notice that Daniel summarized the entire 70 week period by including all of these factors in the 70 weeks.

Next, Daniel broke the 70 week period into three segments: 7 weeks, 62 weeks, and 1 week. Verse 25 pertains to the first two sections of the 70th week period. During these two periods, that is during 69 of the 70 prophetic weeks, a decree would go forth calling for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the reconstruction of the Temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians (cf. Nehemiah

2:7-8; Ezra 1:1-3). Daniel made clear that these 69 weeks of the prophetic period, during which the Temple would be rebuilt and national Israel reestablished, would take one up to the appearance of the Messiah.

Verse 26 speaks of the **final** week of the 70 week prophetic period, for he said “**after** the 62 weeks” (which already followed the initial 7 weeks). “After” puts one into the final or 70th week of Daniel’s remarks. Two significant events were to occur during this final week. First, the Messiah would be “cut off.” This definitely refers to Jesus’ death upon the cross: “He was cut off from the land of the living” (Isaiah 53:8). Second, a “prince” and his people would come and destroy the city and the sanctuary—an obvious allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple edifice in A.D. 70 by Titus and his Roman army.

Verse 27 alludes to the activation of the new covenant between the Messiah and “many,” that is, between Christ and those who are responsive to the demands of the new covenant. As the Hebrews writer said: “Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (8:8; cf. Acts 3:25). The New Testament teaches that the cutting off of the Messiah—the crucifixion—was the **act** that confirmed the covenant (Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 9:15-29), and brought an immediate end to the validity of the Old Testament practices of sacrifice and oblation (Colossians 2:14; Luke 23:45; Hebrews 10:18-20). Then Daniel alluded to the ruthless invasion of Jerusalem in the phrase “abomination of desolation” (interpreted by dispensationalists to be the “Antichrist”). Jesus quoted this phrase in Matthew 24:15 and Luke 21:20, and applied it to the Roman desecration and destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70.

Thus, the fundamental purpose of Daniel’s 70 weeks prophecy was to

show God's final and complete decree concerning the Israelite commonwealth. All of the events described in the prophecy were literally fulfilled nearly 2,000 years ago. As far as God is concerned, the logical end of the Old Testament and Judaism has occurred. Now He deals only with the **spiritual** children of Abraham, whether Jew or Gentile (Romans 4:11-12,16; 9:8)—the church of Christ which is the **actual** “Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

[to be continued]

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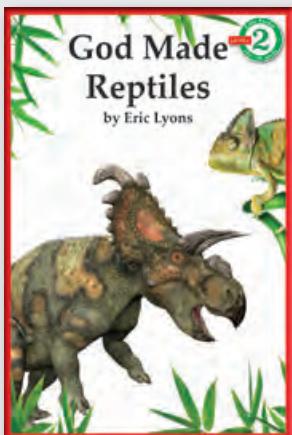
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